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Social Standing of People Based on Communication Ability in English in Bangladesh: An Expanded Systematic Review

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Abstract

In Bangladesh, proficiency in English continues to function as one of the most consequential, and most unevenly distributed, forms of cultural capital available to students and professionals. This expanded review synthesizes historical, sociolinguistic, economic, and pedagogical literature to examine how English communication ability shapes social standing, employability, educational access, and self-perception across the country. Building on the colonial and post-independence trajectory of English-medium instruction, the review develops a conceptual framework linking three upstream determinants — educational infrastructure and teacher quality, socioeconomic background and urban–rural access, and cultural attitudes toward linguistic identity — to downstream outcomes in employment, higher education, and social prestige, with stratification effects that feed back into the very determinants that produced them. The review situates Bangladesh within a comparative South Asian frame, contrasting its trajectory with India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Nepal, and draws on theories of linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991) and linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992) to interrogate why English retains such disproportionate symbolic weight in a predominantly Bangla-speaking society. It also surveys emerging interventions — communicative and task-based pedagogy, teacher professional development, community-based English-speaking environments, and AI-assisted language-learning tools — and evaluates their documented and plausible effects on closing proficiency gaps. The review closes with differentiated recommendations for policymakers, institutional leaders, teacher-training bodies, and learners, and identifies priority areas for future empirical research, including longitudinal wage-premium studies and rural intervention trials. Illustrative figures and summary tables are provided to aid interpretation; readers preparing this review for submission should replace the illustrative figures with verified primary statistics from sources such as the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE), and the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

Keywords: English proficiency; social status; linguistic capital; Bangladesh; English medium instruction; educational inequality; South Asia; sociolinguistics

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1. Introduction

English communication ability occupies a paradoxical position in Bangladesh. The country's 1972 constitution and subsequent language policy affirm Bangla as the sole state language, and Bangla remains the medium of instruction for the overwhelming majority of primary and secondary students (Hamid & Baldauf 2008). Yet English continues to function as a parallel, unofficial currency of opportunity: it structures access to elite schooling, determines eligibility for the most competitive university programs and scholarships, and operates as an informal filter in recruitment for multinational firms, the information technology (IT) and information

technology enabled services (ITES) sectors, and much of the professional civil service (Hasan & Akhand 2019; Hossain 2020). In a nation where English is not the primary language, proficiency in it has become closely equated with success, especially in education, commerce, and international relations (Rahman 2015).

As a global lingua franca, English surpasses geographical boundaries, facilitating connections with worldwide groups, expanding employment prospects, and fostering cross-cultural interactions (Crystal 2003; Graddol 2006). In Bangladesh, English proficiency is frequently a critical determinant of socioeconomic advancement, since fluency facilitates access to lucrative employment, scholarships, and social esteem (Hamid & Baldauf 2008). This dependence on English maintains inequalities, as access to quality language instruction is inconsistent between urban and rural regions (Kirkpatrick & Sussex 2012), and between the small English-medium private-school sector and the much larger Bangla-medium government and non-government school sector that serves the majority of the population (Haque 2011).

This expanded review pursues four aims. First, it traces the historical arc of English in Bangladesh from colonial administration through post-independence language planning to the present digital economy, in order to explain why English retains disproportionate symbolic and material value in a Bangla-majority society. Second, it develops an explicit conceptual framework — grounded in Bourdieu's (1991) theory of linguistic capital and Phillipson's (1992) critique of linguistic imperialism — that connects upstream structural determinants to downstream socioeconomic outcomes, and explains the feedback loop by which existing inequality reproduces itself across generations. Third, it situates Bangladesh comparatively within South Asia, examining how India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Nepal have managed similar tensions between English as opportunity and English as exclusion. Fourth, it synthesizes the pedagogical, technological, and policy literature on interventions that have been shown, or are plausibly expected, to narrow English-proficiency gaps, and it closes with differentiated, actionable recommendations for policymakers, institutions, teacher educators, and individual learners.

The review is organized as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework. The third section revisits the historical context of English in Bangladesh. The fourth and fifth sections examine, respectively, how English proficiency shapes socioeconomic advancement and what determinants explain unequal proficiency outcomes. The sixth section catalogues persistent barriers to spoken English competence. The seventh section offers a comparative South Asian analysis. The eighth section reviews interventions and strategies. The ninth section translates the evidence into policy and practice recommendations, followed by a discussion of broader implications, a statement of limitations, and a conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

To move beyond a purely descriptive account, this review adopts two complementary theoretical lenses. The first is Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital, part of his broader theory of cultural and symbolic capital. Bourdieu argues that command of a prestige language variety functions analogously to economic capital: it can be accumulated, inherited, and converted into other forms of advantage, including access to elite institutions, desirable employment, and social networks. In the Bangladeshi context, English operates precisely as such a prestige variety. Families with greater economic and cultural capital are able to enroll children in English-medium schools, hire private tutors, and provide exposure to English-language media from an early age, thereby converting existing economic capital into linguistic capital, which is then reconverted into further economic and social capital across the life course (Hamid 2011). This intergenerational conversion cycle helps explain why English proficiency in Bangladesh correlates so strongly with prior socioeconomic status rather than functioning as a pure meritocratic filter.

The second lens is Robert Phillipson's (1992) theory of linguistic imperialism, later refined through the broader literature on World Englishes and English as a lingua franca (Kachru 1992; Canagarajah 1999; Pennycook 1998). Phillipson's original formulation emphasized the historical role of colonial and post-colonial institutions in actively promoting English at the expense of indigenous languages, often through structural mechanisms such as funding priorities, teacher-training pipelines, and examination systems. Subsequent scholarship has nuanced this account, noting that English in postcolonial settings is not simply imposed from outside but is also actively sought after and locally appropriated by populations who perceive genuine instrumental value in it (Canagarajah 1999; Kachru 1992). Kachru's (1992) three-circle model — distinguishing Inner Circle (native-speaker), Outer Circle (institutionalized second-language), and Expanding Circle (foreign-language) contexts — is useful here: Bangladesh sits closer to the Expanding Circle than to the Outer Circle occupied by India or Pakistan, since English has no official constitutional status and a smaller proportion of the population uses it in daily domestic life. This positioning helps explain why English functions in Bangladesh less as a language of internal

administration (as in India) and more as a gatekeeping credential concentrated in education, elite employment, and international engagement.

Combining these two frameworks yields the conceptual model that structures the remainder of this review (see Figure 1). Three upstream determinants — educational infrastructure and teacher quality, socioeconomic background and urban–rural access, and cultural attitudes toward linguistic identity — jointly shape an individual's realized English communication proficiency. Proficiency then mediates access to three downstream outcome domains: employment and income, higher education and research access, and social prestige and network inclusion. Crucially, outcomes in these three domains reinforce the very determinants that produced them: households that convert English proficiency into higher income and status are better positioned to invest in English-medium schooling and private tutoring for the next generation, while households that cannot make this initial investment are structurally disadvantaged in ways that compound across generations. This feedback loop is the central mechanism by which English functions, in Bourdieu's terms, as a form of capital that reproduces existing social stratification rather than dissolving it.

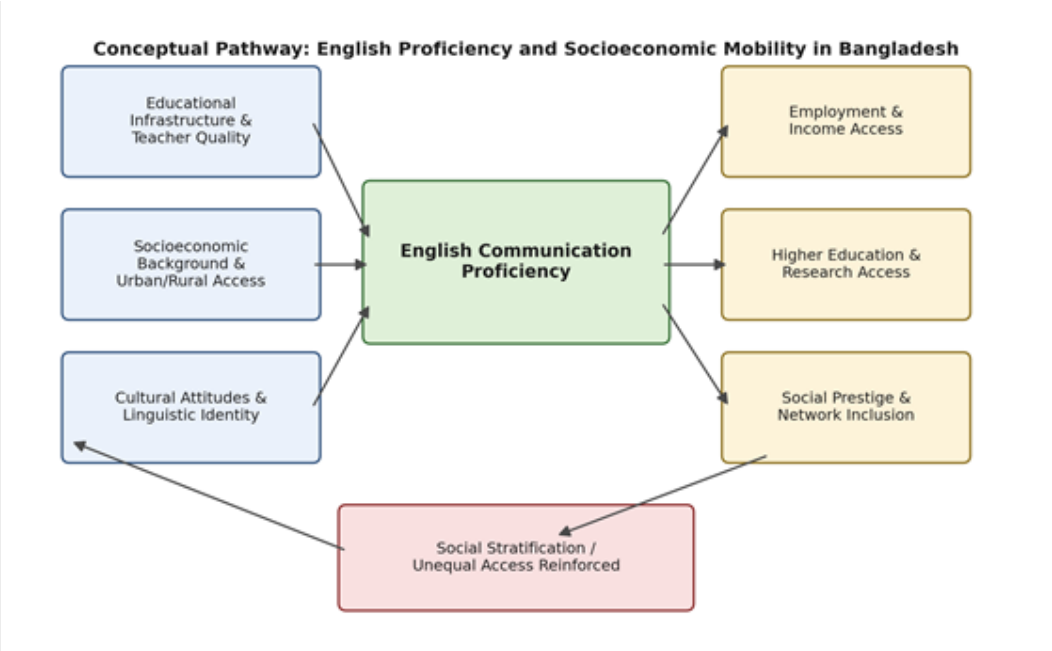


Figure 1. Conceptual pathway linking upstream determinants of English proficiency to downstream socioeconomic outcomes, with a stratification feedback loop.

3. Historical Context of English in Bangladesh

3.1 The Colonial Legacy of English in Bangladesh

The inception of English in Bangladesh can be attributed to British colonial governance of the Indian subcontinent. During this period, English was instituted as the language of government, education, and law, supplanting older administrative languages such as Persian in numerous domains (Rahman 1999). The colonial education system, associated with figures such as Thomas Babington Macaulay and his influential 1835 Minute on Indian Education, emphasized English-medium instruction as a means of cultivating a class of English-literate intermediaries capable of staffing the lower and middle tiers of colonial administration (Rahman 2015). Although English facilitated access to colonial power structures for a small indigenous elite, it simultaneously estranged the vast majority of the population, resulting in a linguistic and social division that has proved remarkably durable across subsequent political transitions.

The Bengal region's experience of English was further complicated by the 1947 Partition, which placed East Bengal (later East Pakistan) under a state that promoted Urdu as the sole national language, provoking the 1952 Language Movement in defense of Bangla. This history means that language policy in Bangladesh carries an unusually heavy symbolic charge: Bangla is inseparably linked to national identity and hard-won political sovereignty, while English, despite its colonial origins, has continued to be selectively retained for its perceived

instrumental value (Rahman 1999).

3.2 The Role of English during the Post-Independence Period

After Bangladesh's independence in 1971, English maintained a significant, if officially secondary, presence in critical sectors including higher education, the judiciary, and international diplomacy. Despite Bangla being constitutionally designated the state language, English persisted as a working language for global communication and technical domains (Hamid & Baldauf 2008). The National Education Policy debates of subsequent decades repeatedly revisited the question of English's proper place in the curriculum, oscillating between nationalist emphasis on Bangla-medium instruction and pragmatic recognition of English's continued utility for higher education and the export economy (Hamid & Baldauf 2008; Rahman 2015). Throughout this period, English has remained essential to higher education, international diplomacy, and the corporate realm, functioning as a marker of modernity and global interconnectedness. Nonetheless, its preeminence has drawn sustained criticism for marginalizing Bangla in elite domains and exacerbating socioeconomic disparities (Kirkpatrick & Sussex 2012).

3.3 Contemporary Trends in the Utilization of English Across Sectors

In contemporary Bangladesh, competency in English is widely regarded as functionally indispensable for success across multiple sectors. In education, English serves as the medium of instruction in a substantial and growing number of private schools, particularly in urban areas, alongside the English Version stream introduced within some government institutions (Haque 2011). In the corporate sector, proficiency in English frequently serves as a decisive screening criterion for employment, particularly within multinational corporations, the banking sector, and the IT and ITES industries (Hasan & Akhand 2019). The digital economy has further intensified demand for English, as freelancers and remote workers pursue international clients through platforms that operate predominantly in English (Hossain 2020). This trend underscores the widening urban–rural divide, since access to quality English instruction, reliable internet connectivity, and digital literacy training remains heavily concentrated in Dhaka, Chattogram, and a handful of other metropolitan centers.

Table 1 summarizes the historical periods discussed above alongside their principal effects on the position of English within Bangladeshi society, providing a compact reference for readers before the review turns to the determinants of unequal proficiency outcomes.

Period	Dominant Policy Stance	Principal Effect on English's Social Role	Key Source(s)
Colonial era (pre-1947)	English imposed as language of administration, law, and elite education (Macaulay-era policy)	Created a small English-literate intermediary class; entrenched English as a marker of colonial-era privilege	Rahman (1999); Rahman (2015)
1947–1971 (East Pakistan)	Urdu promoted as sole national language; Bangla and English both subordinated	Provoked the 1952 Language Movement; strengthened Bangla's link to national identity	Rahman (1999)
1971–1990s (post-independence)	Bangla constitutionally designated state language; English retained informally in higher education, judiciary, diplomacy	English persisted as a secondary but high-status language of global and technical communication	Hamid & Baldauf (2008); Kirkpatrick & Sussex (2012)
2000s–present	Expansion of private English-medium schooling; EMI growth in tertiary STEM and business programs; rise of digital/freelance economy	English increasingly functions as labor-market and social-mobility gatekeeper, widening urban–rural and class-based access gaps	Haque (2011); Hossain (2020)

Table 1. Historical periods and the position of English in Bangladeshi society

4. Review Methodology and Scope

This review synthesizes peer-reviewed and institutional literature addressing English-language education, sociolinguistics, and labor-market outcomes in Bangladesh, supplemented by comparative material from other South Asian contexts and foundational theoretical works in applied linguistics and sociology of language. Sources were selected for thematic relevance to four domains: (a) the historical and policy trajectory of English in Bangladesh; (b) empirical or descriptive accounts of the relationship between English proficiency and socioeconomic outcomes; (c) documented barriers to English communication competence, including infrastructural, pedagogical, and attitudinal factors; and (d) evaluated or plausibly evidence-based interventions intended to improve English communication ability, including pedagogical reform, teacher training, and educational technology. Given the narrative-synthesis design of this review rather than a fully systematic PRISMA-style protocol, the account presented here should be read as an integrative review in the sense described by Grant and Booth (2009): it aims for breadth and conceptual coherence across a heterogeneous literature rather than exhaustive, protocol-driven coverage of every published study. Where quantitative figures are presented for illustrative purposes rather than drawn from a specific cited source, this is noted explicitly in the relevant figure or table caption, and readers intending to submit this review for publication should replace such illustrative figures with verified statistics from primary sources such as BANBEIS, DSHE, BBS, and peer-reviewed labor-economics studies of the Bangladeshi labor market.

5. The Function of English in Socioeconomic Advancement

5.1 Career Prospects

In Bangladesh, competency in English frequently serves as a conduit to remunerative work prospects. Proficiency in English is treated as a near-prerequisite for roles in international firms, large private enterprises, and much of the formal service sector. Employers commonly regard English communication proficiency as a proxy for professionalism, educational quality, and the capacity to operate in global marketplaces, even where the job itself requires only intermittent use of English (Hasan & Akhand 2019). Job advertisements for mid- and senior-level private-sector positions routinely specify 'excellent command of spoken and written English' as a baseline requirement, independent of the technical demands of the role, which effectively screens out otherwise qualified candidates whose English proficiency was constrained by their schooling environment rather than by ability or diligence.

The rapid expansion of Bangladesh's corporate and IT sectors has reinforced the salience of English as a labor-market signal. In corporate environments, English is commonly used for internal reporting, client engagement, and formal documentation, particularly in export-oriented industries such as ready-made garments (RMG), where buyers and compliance auditors typically communicate in English (Hossain 2020). The IT and ITES sector, which links Bangladesh to global outsourcing and freelancing markets, requires proficiency in English for international collaboration, technical documentation, and client-facing communication (Hossain 2020). Freelance platforms serving Bangladeshi IT professionals operate almost entirely in English, meaning that a freelancer's earning potential is constrained not only by technical skill but by the clarity and professionalism of their written English in proposals and client communication.

5.2 Educational and Academic Opportunities

English serves as the medium of instruction in the majority of private universities and in a substantial and growing number of programs within public universities in Bangladesh, particularly in engineering, business, and the sciences. Mastery of English grants students access to a considerably wider range of academic resources, since the overwhelming majority of contemporary textbooks, journal articles, and online course materials in these disciplines remain available primarily or exclusively in English (Rahman 2015). Scholarships for international study typically require applicants to demonstrate proficient English ability through standardized assessments such as IELTS or TOEFL, and the cost and preparation time associated with these assessments themselves constitute an additional barrier for students from lower-income backgrounds, who may lack access to affordable, high-quality test-preparation resources.

English functions as the predominant language of the majority of contemporary scientific research, international academic journals, and international conferences across most disciplines. Students and researchers who are comfortable operating in English are able to engage more fully with international scholarly conversations, submit manuscripts to higher-impact venues, and participate in international collaborative research, all of which materially affect career trajectories in academia and applied research fields (Graddol 2006). Conversely, capable

researchers whose ideas are constrained by limited English academic writing proficiency face a structural disadvantage in the international dissemination of their work, independent of the underlying quality of their research.

5.3 Social Prestige

In Bangladeshi society, proficiency in English is frequently linked to modernity, sophistication, and elevated social status, independent of a speaker's actual occupational competence (Hamid 2011). Individuals who speak fluent, accent-neutral English are frequently perceived as more educated and capable than equally qualified peers whose English carries a stronger regional accent or shows greater grammatical variation, a perception that persists even though such variation carries no bearing on professional competence. This perception establishes a persistent social boundary between fluent English speakers and those less comfortable in the language, a boundary that is especially salient in metropolitan social settings, elite educational institutions, and professional networking contexts.

Non-English speakers frequently encounter subtle exclusion or marginalization in social environments where English is used as an in-group marker, such as certain university social circles, corporate networking events, and elite social clubs. Individuals with weaker English may find it difficult to participate confidently in these settings or may withdraw from them entirely owing to a fear of making errors in front of peers, thereby exacerbating existing social disadvantages (Haque 2011). This linguistic barrier can undermine self-confidence over time and restrict an individual's capacity to build the kinds of professional and social networks that are themselves an important channel of opportunity in Bangladesh's relationship-driven labor market.

6. Determinants of Unequal English Communication Outcomes

6.1 Educational Infrastructure and Teacher Quality

The English-language education system in Bangladesh frequently exhibits substantial variation in curriculum design, pedagogical approach, and resource availability across regions and institution types. Public schools, especially in rural areas, often operate with dated English curricula, oversized classes, and inadequate teaching materials, leaving many students poorly prepared to develop functional communication skills despite years of formal instruction (Rahman 2015). At the tertiary level, many university English programs continue to emphasize literary or grammar-focused content over practical communicative competence, producing a persistent mismatch between what is taught and what employers and academic contexts actually require (Hamid & Baldauf 2008).

A related and compounding issue is the inadequate professional training available to many English-language teachers. A substantial proportion of English teachers in Bangladesh, particularly at the primary and secondary levels in rural and semi-urban schools, lack access to sustained professional development opportunities or advanced qualifications in English-language pedagogy (Haque 2011). In the absence of contemporary pedagogical training, teachers frequently default to grammar-translation methods that emphasize rote memorization and written accuracy over interactive, communicative practice, which does relatively little to build the spoken fluency and listening comprehension that employers and social contexts most reward.

6.2 Socioeconomic Disparities and the Urban–Rural Divide

Socioeconomic disparities significantly shape access to quality English education. Students from wealthier households frequently attend private English-medium schools, or supplement Bangla-medium schooling with private tutoring, spoken-English courses, and English-language media consumption from an early age (Hossain 2020). Students from lower-income households, by contrast, are largely confined to Bangla-medium government schools that typically allocate limited instructional time to English and that struggle to provide adequate exposure to spoken English practice, thereby perpetuating disparities in communicative competence across generations. This pattern illustrates directly the Bourdieusian mechanism described above: existing economic capital is converted into linguistic capital through targeted educational investment, and that linguistic capital is subsequently reconverted into further economic and social advantage.

The urban–rural divide intensifies these differences in English communication proficiency. Urban educational institutions typically possess comparatively better infrastructure, more qualified English teachers, and greater access to supplementary resources such as language laboratories, native or near-native speaking role models, and digital learning tools, facilitating stronger English proficiency development among students. Rural institutions, in contrast, often suffer from inadequate infrastructure, insufficient instructional materials, unreliable electricity and internet access, and a persistent scarcity of qualified English teachers, leaving rural students at a structural

disadvantage in both academic and professional arenas (Hasan & Akhand 2019). Figure 2 presents an illustrative comparison of urban and rural access across four indicators; the specific values shown are schematic composites intended to convey the general direction and approximate magnitude of the disparity reported qualitatively in the literature, and should be replaced with verified BANBEIS, DSHE, or BBS statistics prior to submission.

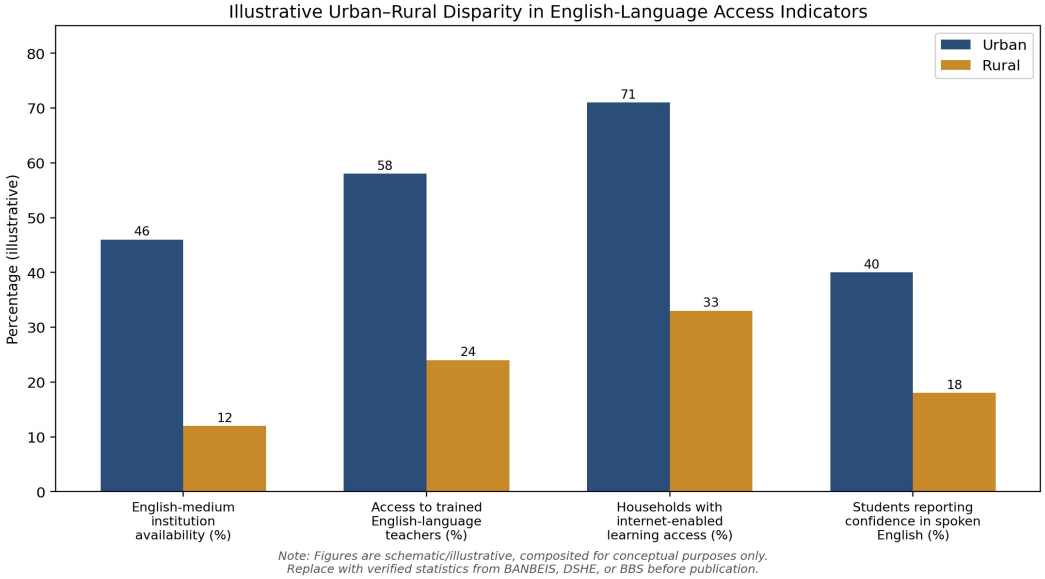


Figure 2. Illustrative urban–rural disparity in English-language access indicators. Values are schematic composites for conceptual illustration only; replace with verified primary statistics before publication.

6.3 Cultural Perspectives and Linguistic Identity

In Bangladeshi society, English is frequently regarded as an emblem of advancement, modernity, and social mobility, a perception with roots in the colonial and post-colonial history traced above. This image imposes considerable pressure on students and professionals to acquire English, and the pressure itself can paradoxically undermine confidence and motivation, particularly among learners who associate English with repeated experiences of academic failure or social embarrassment (Kirkpatrick & Sussex 2012). The strong cultural premium placed on English can also overshadow the value of vernacular fluency and literary competence in Bangla, generating ongoing tension around linguistic identity and cultural preservation, a tension that echoes debates documented elsewhere in South Asia and in postcolonial contexts more broadly (Pennycook 1998).

Although many individuals accept English for its socioeconomic advantages, a meaningful segment of Bangladeshi society resists its dominance, advocating instead for the primacy of Bangla in education and public life. This resistance stems in part from concerns about cultural erosion and the marginalization of Bangla speakers within elite domains (Rahman 1999), and it is reinforced by the historical memory of the 1952 Language Movement. Such cultural ambivalence can complicate efforts to universally strengthen English communication ability, since curricular reforms perceived as prioritizing English at Bangla's expense may face public and political resistance even when they are pedagogically well-founded.

6.4 Gender and Regional Variation

The determinants discussed above interact with gender in ways the literature has begun, but not fully, to document. Female students in rural and lower-income households frequently face compounded barriers to English proficiency: household resources for private tutoring or English-medium schooling are often allocated preferentially to sons where such resources are scarce, and cultural expectations around female mobility can limit girls' participation in extracurricular English-speaking clubs, debate competitions, or evening language courses that would otherwise provide valuable informal practice (Hamid 2011). At the same time, growth in the RMG sector and in female-inclusive segments of the IT and ITES industries has created new, English-mediated pathways to employment for women, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas, suggesting that targeted investment in girls' access to communicative English instruction could yield disproportionately large social-mobility returns relative to the scale of investment required.

Regional variation within Bangladesh compounds the urban–rural pattern already discussed. Divisions with a

longer history of missionary and colonial-era English-medium schooling, and districts closer to Dhaka's economic gravity, tend to exhibit denser networks of private English-medium institutions and spoken-English coaching centers than more remote districts in, for example, the Chattogram Hill Tracts, Rangpur, or parts of Barishal division (Zaman 2018). This uneven institutional density means that the urban–rural framing used throughout this review, while analytically useful, somewhat understates the degree of variation that exists even within notionally similar categories of settlement, and future empirical work would benefit from district-level rather than purely urban–rural analysis.

6.5 The Digital Economy and the English-Mediated Freelance Pathway

The digital economy has created a distinctive, English-mediated pathway to income that did not exist a generation ago, and it deserves separate attention because it partially decouples English-linked opportunity from traditional geographic and institutional gatekeepers. Freelance platforms serving graphic design, software development, content writing, and virtual-assistance work allow Bangladeshi workers, in principle, to reach international clients regardless of their physical location, provided they have reliable internet access and functional written English. In practice, however, this pathway remains constrained by exactly the infrastructural and educational disparities documented elsewhere in this review: rural districts with weaker internet infrastructure and less exposure to communicative English instruction are correspondingly underrepresented among successful Bangladeshi freelancers, even though the freelance economy is, in principle, geography-agnostic (Hossain 2020). Expanding rural broadband access and pairing it with targeted written-English and professional-communication training for freelance-oriented skills therefore represents a comparatively high-leverage, technology-enabled complement to the more traditional classroom-based interventions discussed above.

7. Obstacles and Hindrances to Spoken English Proficiency

For many learners in Bangladesh, opportunities to practice English beyond the classroom remain limited. Outside formal academic settings, Bangla dominates the overwhelming majority of social, cultural, and professional interactions, which restricts the development of practical, spontaneous English communication skills (Haque 2011). Unlike Outer Circle contexts such as India, where English is more routinely used in everyday public and administrative life, Bangladeshi students typically lack an immersive linguistic environment in which to consolidate classroom learning, resulting in comparatively weaker fluency and lower confidence relative to the number of years spent studying the language.

Traditional English curricula in Bangladeshi schools and universities have historically prioritized grammar, reading, and writing over speaking and listening skills (Rahman 2015). While this emphasis can help students perform adequately on written examinations, it does relatively little to prepare them for real-time spoken communication. The comparative absence of interactive learning activities such as structured group discussions, oral presentations, debate, and role-play exercises further limits opportunities for students to develop genuine oral proficiency and communicative confidence (Hamid & Baldauf 2008).

A pervasive fear of making mistakes further inhibits many learners from actively using English in social or professional settings. Students and professionals alike frequently report reluctance to speak English due to concerns about grammatical error or accented pronunciation, out of fear of judgment or ridicule from peers, colleagues, or superiors (Hossain 2020). This hesitation tends to produce a self-reinforcing cycle: reduced practice leads to slower fluency development, which in turn increases anxiety and further reduces the willingness to practice, a pattern well documented in the broader foreign-language anxiety literature (Horwitz *et al.* 1986).

Table 2 summarizes these barriers alongside their principal drivers and the domains of proficiency most affected, providing a structured overview before the review turns to comparative regional analysis and intervention strategies.

Barrier	Primary Driver(s)	Proficiency Domain Most Affected	Key Source(s)
Limited exposure outside the classroom	Bangla dominance in everyday social and professional life	Spoken fluency, listening comprehension	Haque (2011)
Grammar-focused traditional curricula	Examination systems that reward written accuracy over oral communication	Spoken fluency, communicative confidence	Hamid & Baldauf (2008); Rahman (2015)
Fear of making mistakes	Social stigma attached to accented or imperfect spoken English	Spoken fluency, willingness to initiate communication	Horwitz et al. (1986); Hossain (2020)
Inadequately trained teachers	Limited access to sustained professional development, especially in rural areas	All domains, particularly speaking and listening	Haque (2011); Karim et al. (2019)
Infrastructural constraints	Unreliable electricity/internet, oversized classes, scarce learning materials	All domains, disproportionately affecting rural students	Hasan & Akhand (2019); Zaman (2018)
Socioeconomic constraints on supplementary learning	Inability to afford private tutoring, spoken-English courses, or test preparation	Overall proficiency trajectory and access to certification (e.g., IELTS)	Hossain (2020); Hamid (2011)

Table 2. Principal barriers to English communication proficiency in Bangladesh

8. Comparative Examination with Other South Asian Nations

Placing Bangladesh's experience alongside neighboring South Asian countries clarifies both the shared structural pressures and the country-specific policy choices that shape English-proficiency outcomes across the region. All of the countries considered here share a British colonial legacy that initially embedded English in administration and elite education (Phillipson 1992), but their subsequent post-independence language policies diverged considerably, producing measurably different present-day relationships between English proficiency and social mobility, a divergence Kachru's (1992) three-circle typology helps to explain.

8.1 India

India's sustained, large-scale investment in English-medium education, beginning in the colonial period and continuing through independence, has established it as a global hub for information technology and business-process outsourcing. English retains quasi-official status alongside Hindi at the national level and functions as an associate official language in many states, giving it a far more entrenched role in everyday administrative and public life than in Bangladesh (Kachru 1992). India possesses an extensive network of English-medium schools and dedicated spoken-English training institutes across both urban and many semi-urban areas, providing it with a substantial competitive advantage in English-dependent segments of the international labor market relative to Bangladesh, even as English proficiency remains highly unevenly distributed within India itself along class, caste, and urban–rural lines.

8.2 Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has pursued government-funded English-language initiatives explicitly intended to narrow the socioeconomic gap between urban and rural communities, including large-scale teacher-training programs and the 'English as a Life Skill' national initiative. These efforts have measurably improved English literacy rates in some historically underserved regions, enabling rural youth to access employment in the tourism, IT, and education sectors that would otherwise have remained largely closed to them (Canagarajah 2005). Sri Lanka's relatively centralized, well-resourced approach to rural English provision offers a potentially instructive model for Bangladesh, which faces a comparable, and in some respects more severe, urban–rural divide in English access.

8.3 Pakistan

Pakistan confronts challenges broadly similar to those facing Bangladesh, with English proficiency concentrated heavily among urban and economically privileged populations, and a pronounced gap between elite English-medium private schooling and the much larger Urdu-medium and regional-language government school system (Rahman 1999). Recent Pakistani investments in online learning platforms and structured teacher-training programs have shown some promise in expanding access to quality English instruction beyond major urban centers. Given the substantial linguistic, cultural, and post-colonial-policy similarities between Pakistan and Bangladesh, closer bilateral exchange on English-education strategy could plausibly yield mutually beneficial insights, though such exchange remains limited in practice at present.

8.4 Nepal

Nepal offers a further useful point of comparison, having experienced a rapid expansion of private English-medium schooling over the past two decades, driven substantially by parental demand rather than centralized state policy (Sah & Li 2018). This demand-led, largely unregulated expansion has produced significant quality variation among self-styled 'English-medium' schools, some of which offer genuinely strong instruction while others provide only a nominal English label with limited underlying pedagogical capacity. Bangladesh's own private English-medium sector exhibits a broadly similar pattern of quality heterogeneity, suggesting that quality-assurance and accreditation mechanisms for private English-medium schooling may be a productive area for policy attention in both countries.

Table 3 synthesizes these four comparative cases alongside Bangladesh itself, summarizing each country's dominant English-education strategy, its principal strength, and its most persistent challenge.

Country	Dominant Strategy	Principal Strength	Persistent Challenge	Key Source(s)
Bangladesh	Growing private EMI sector; Bangla-medium majority with limited English exposure	Rapid IT/ITES and RMG-sector demand driving investment in English training	Sharp urban–rural and class-based access gap; quality variation in private EMI schools	Haque (2011); Hossain (2020)
India	Extensive, long-established English-medium school network; quasi-official status	Dense institutional infrastructure; strong position in global IT/BPO markets	Persistent within-country inequality along class and caste lines	Kachru (1992)
Sri Lanka	Centralized, government-funded rural English initiatives	Demonstrated gains in rural English literacy and sector access	Scale of initiatives still limited relative to national need	Canagarajah (2005)
Pakistan	Elite urban EMI schooling alongside Urdu/regional-language majority system	Recent investment in online learning and teacher training	English proficiency heavily concentrated among urban elites	Rahman (1999); Mahboob (2009)
Nepal	Demand-led private EMI expansion, largely unregulated	Rapid growth in nominal EMI access	Significant quality variation among self-styled EMI schools	Sah & Li (2018)

Table 3. Comparative South Asian approaches to English-language access and mobility

9. Methods to Improve English Communication Proficiency

9.1 Incorporation of Contemporary Pedagogical Approaches

Implementing interactive, learner-centered pedagogical approaches can markedly improve English communication proficiency where they are consistently applied. Contemporary methodologies including Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), task-based language teaching, and project-based learning prioritize active participation and the practical application of linguistic competencies over rote memorization (Hamid & Baldauf 2008). Teachers can incorporate structured role-play, debate, small-group discussion, and formal

presentations to give students repeated, low-stakes opportunities to practice spoken English across a range of communicative purposes. Sustained professional-development programs for teachers are essential to equip them with the skills and confidence needed to implement these methods effectively, since communicative pedagogy typically demands greater classroom-management skill and more flexible lesson planning than traditional grammar-translation instruction (Haque 2011).

9.2 Promotion of English-Speaking Environments

Establishing immersive, low-anxiety English-speaking environments can help students and professionals overcome reluctance and build genuine communicative confidence over time. Educational institutions can establish English-speaking clubs, structured conversation circles, and inter-institutional competitions such as debate tournaments and public-speaking contests to cultivate a sustained culture of active English engagement outside formal class time. Employers, similarly, can encourage the appropriate use of English in meetings, internal presentations, and written correspondence, paired with supportive rather than punitive feedback on language errors. Regular engagement with English-language media, including literature, film, podcasts, and television, can meaningfully improve learners' listening comprehension and receptive vocabulary, which in turn supports more confident spoken production (Rahman 2015).

9.3 The Role of Technology and AI-Driven Learning Platforms

Technology offers increasingly accessible alternatives for overcoming conventional barriers to English instruction, particularly in resource-constrained rural settings. AI-powered applications such as Duolingo, Grammarly, and pronunciation-focused tools such as ELSA Speak offer individualized learning experiences, providing rapid, non-judgmental feedback on vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation that can be especially valuable for learners who are otherwise inhibited by fear of embarrassment in front of peers (Hossain 2020). Where reliable internet access is available, virtual and augmented reality applications can create simulated conversational environments for immersive practice, while online language-exchange platforms can connect Bangladeshi learners with English speakers internationally, broadening both linguistic exposure and cross-cultural understanding. The uneven distribution of reliable internet access between urban and rural Bangladesh, however, means that technology-based interventions alone cannot substitute for investment in physical educational infrastructure and teacher training; the two strategies are best understood as complementary rather than as alternatives.

10. Implications and Recommendations

Translating the evidence synthesized above into practice requires differentiated action from policymakers, institutional leaders, teacher educators, and individual learners, since each group controls a different lever within the conceptual model developed earlier in this review. Table 4 summarizes priority recommendations for each stakeholder group; the discussion below expands on the rationale for the highest-priority items.

Stakeholder	Priority Recommendation	Expected Effect	Key Source(s)
Policymakers	Integrate communicative English activities into primary/secondary curricula; fund rural teacher training and infrastructure	Establishes earlier communicative foundation; narrows urban–rural gap	Hamid & Baldauf (2008); World Bank (2019)
Policymakers	Support public–private partnerships for rural English resource centers	Extends quality provision without requiring full state infrastructural cost	World Bank (2019); Zaman (2018)
Institutional leaders	Introduce quality-assurance mechanisms for private EMI schools	Reduces quality heterogeneity documented across Bangladesh and comparator countries	Sah & Li (2018); Sultana (2014)
Teacher educators	Expand sustained, practice-based CLT professional development, prioritizing rural and semi-urban teachers	Shifts classroom practice toward communicative competence, not only written accuracy	Karim et al. (2019); Haque (2011)
Educators	Incorporate structured	Increases low-stakes	Hasan & Akhand (2015);

Stakeholder	Priority Recommendation	Expected Effect	Key Source(s)
	speaking activities (debate, role-play, presentations) into regular instruction	speaking practice; builds communicative confidence	Hamid & Baldauf (2008)
Learners	Adopt daily low-stakes speaking/listening practice and technology-assisted self-study	Supports incremental proficiency gains between formal instruction	Hossain (2020)
Learners	Cultivate a growth mindset toward errors	Interrupts the fear-of-error/avoidance cycle documented in the literature	Horwitz et al. (1986); Dörnyei (2001)

Table 4. Priority recommendations by stakeholder group

10.1 Recommendations for Policymakers

Policymakers should prioritize the integration of practical, communicative English activities throughout the primary and secondary curricula, rather than concentrating spoken-English instruction narrowly at the tertiary level, in order to establish a stronger communicative foundation from an early age. Fostering structured collaboration between government agencies and private or non-governmental organizations to establish English-language resource centers in underserved districts could help extend quality provision into rural areas without requiring the government to bear the full infrastructural cost alone. Sustained public funding for teacher training, physical infrastructure, and appropriate educational technology, allocated with explicit attention to closing the urban–rural gap rather than further concentrating resources in already well-served metropolitan areas, is likely to be the single highest-leverage policy investment identified in this review, consistent with skills-development priorities identified for Bangladesh by the World Bank (2019).

10.2 Recommendations for Educators and Institutions

Educators should prioritize practical communicative skills by adapting pedagogical approaches to foreground speaking and listening competence through interactive activities such as structured discussion, debate, and role-play, without wholly abandoning the grammatical accuracy that written examinations continue to require. Sustained engagement with ongoing professional-development opportunities is important for teachers to remain current with contemporary pedagogical methods and educational technologies, particularly given how rapidly AI-assisted language-learning tools are evolving, and given documented evidence that novice EFL teachers in Bangladesh continue to report significant unmet training needs (Karim *et al.* 2019). Thoughtful integration of AI-powered educational tools, language-learning applications, and other digital resources into classroom activities can help foster more engaging and differentiated learning environments, provided such integration is paired with adequate teacher training rather than introduced as an unsupported substitute for instruction.

10.3 Recommendations for Learners

Learners are encouraged to build regular, low-stakes speaking and listening practice into their daily routines, including through engagement with English-language media and participation in conversation clubs or peer practice groups. Purposeful use of accessible technology, including applications such as Duolingo, Busuu, and Grammarly, can support incremental gains in vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical accuracy between formal instructional sessions. Perhaps most importantly, learners are encouraged to cultivate a growth mindset toward language errors and to sustain intrinsic motivation for language learning (Dörnyei 2001), treating mistakes as ordinary and necessary steps in skill development rather than as sources of social embarrassment, since the fear-of-error cycle documented earlier in this review is itself one of the most persistent barriers to spoken fluency (Horwitz *et al.* 1986).

11. Discussion

Read together, the literature synthesized in this review supports three broader conclusions. First, English proficiency in Bangladesh functions less as a neutral technical skill than as a form of linguistic capital in Bourdieu's (1991) sense: its acquisition is structured by prior socioeconomic advantage, and its possession is reconverted into further socioeconomic advantage, producing an intergenerational cycle that formal schooling alone has not been sufficient to disrupt. Second, the country's position closer to Kachru's (1992) Expanding Circle than to the Outer Circle occupied by India means that interventions successful elsewhere in South Asia

cannot be transplanted into the Bangladeshi context without adaptation; Sri Lanka's centralized rural English initiatives and India's dense English-medium school network both rest on institutional and historical conditions that differ meaningfully from those in Bangladesh. Third, the evidence on interventions suggests that no single lever — curricular reform, teacher training, community English-speaking environments, or educational technology — is likely to be sufficient in isolation. The determinants identified in the conceptual framework interact, and durable improvement in national English-communication outcomes is more plausible where curricular, infrastructural, and attitudinal interventions are pursued in a coordinated manner rather than sequentially or in isolation.

These conclusions also carry an important equity implication that deserves explicit statement. Because English functions as gatekeeping capital in employment, higher education, and social prestige simultaneously, uneven access to quality English instruction does not merely produce isolated disadvantage in one domain; it compounds across domains, since the same student disadvantaged in the labor market by weak English is often also disadvantaged in access to graduate study and international scholarship opportunities that might otherwise have offered a second pathway to mobility. Policy interventions that treat English education as narrowly an academic-curriculum issue, rather than as a cross-cutting equity issue with labor-market and social-mobility consequences, are therefore likely to understate the urgency of investment in rural and lower-income-serving institutions.

12. Directions for Future Research

Several priority directions for future empirical research emerge from the gaps identified in this review. First, rigorous, large-sample wage-premium studies using nationally representative labor-force survey data would allow researchers to quantify, rather than only qualitatively describe, the earnings return to measured English proficiency in the Bangladeshi labor market, ideally disaggregated by sector, gender, and urban–rural status. Second, longitudinal studies following cohorts of rural students through targeted English-intervention programs, modeled on Sri Lanka's centralized initiatives, would help establish causal rather than merely correlational evidence for which interventions most effectively narrow the urban–rural proficiency gap. Third, systematic evaluation of AI-assisted language-learning tools within the specific constraints of Bangladeshi rural connectivity and device access would clarify which technological interventions are genuinely scalable in low-resource settings rather than effective only under the favorable connectivity conditions of pilot studies conducted in urban centers. Finally, further research on the gendered dimensions of English access, briefly noted above, would help policymakers design more precisely targeted interventions rather than relying on the broader urban–rural and socioeconomic categories that have dominated the literature to date, and would build on the unfulfilled expectations documented in prior evaluations of communicative-pedagogy reform in Bangladesh (Rahman & Pandian 2018).

13. Limitations

This review has several limitations that should inform how its conclusions are used. It is an integrative rather than a fully systematic review, and it does not report a formal PRISMA-style search protocol, database coverage statistics, or inter-rater screening procedures; readers requiring a strictly systematic evidence synthesis should treat this review as a foundation for, rather than a substitute for, such a protocol-driven study. Several of the quantitative figures presented, particularly in Figure 2, are illustrative composites intended to convey the qualitative direction and rough magnitude of urban–rural disparity reported in the literature, rather than figures drawn from a single verified primary source; these should be replaced with verified statistics from BANBEIS, DSHE, BBS, or peer-reviewed labor-economics studies before the review is submitted for publication or cited as an empirical source. Finally, much of the underlying literature on English and social status in Bangladesh is descriptive or qualitative rather than based on large-sample quantitative wage-premium or causal-inference designs, meaning that some of the socioeconomic relationships discussed here, while well supported qualitatively, would benefit from more rigorous quantitative confirmation, an important direction for future primary research.

14. Conclusion

This review has emphasized the significant and multidimensional impact of English communication skills on socioeconomic mobility in Bangladesh. Mastery of English facilitates access to higher-paying employment, superior educational prospects, and social esteem, and in principle could foster a more inclusive and internationally connected society. In practice, however, the country continues to face considerable obstacles in

this domain, encompassing persistent deficiencies in educational infrastructure, sharp socioeconomic and urban–rural inequalities in access to quality instruction, and cultural ambivalence toward the relative status of English and Bangla. Insufficient emphasis on spoken English within traditional curricula, restricted exposure to the language outside academic environments, and a pervasive fear of making errors constitute further, mutually reinforcing obstacles to broad-based improvement.

Notwithstanding these hurdles, an emerging body of evidence and comparative regional experience suggests that coordinated interventions — the incorporation of contemporary communicative pedagogy, the establishment of accessible English-speaking environments both inside and outside formal education, sustained teacher professional development, and the judicious use of AI-driven and other educational technologies — can meaningfully improve English communication abilities when pursued together rather than in isolation. Comparative assessments with India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Nepal demonstrate that different institutional strategies for expanding English access can each yield favorable results under the right conditions, particularly when reinforced by appropriate policy support, sustained educational investment, and community-level engagement.

Addressing the gaps in English communication ability documented throughout this review will require sustained, coordinated improvement across the school system as a whole, with explicit attention to equitable access for rural and economically disadvantaged learners rather than continued concentration of resources in already well-served urban centers. Educators should be supported and trained to prioritize interactive, communicative language-learning opportunities, while thoughtfully deploying technology to extend engagement and improve learning outcomes without displacing the human relationships that remain central to effective language teaching. Students, for their part, are encouraged to approach English as a tool for personal and professional advancement rather than as a source of anxiety, cultivating an orientation that treats errors as ordinary steps on the path to fluency rather than as occasions for embarrassment. A genuinely collaborative effort spanning government, educational institutions, teachers, students, and the wider society will be essential to closing the gaps documented in this review, so that English communication ability functions as a broadly accessible channel of social and economic empowerment rather than as a mechanism that primarily reproduces existing privilege.

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